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Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* and Contemporary Thought

Revisiting the Horror with Lacoue-Labarthe

Edited by

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Postface: A talk with Avital Ronell (about Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe)[1]

NL: In your career you have done much to promote the thought of Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe: from introducing his work and disseminating his concepts during his lifetime, to honouring his memory and pursuing his legacy after his disappearance. You have known him as a colleague, privileged interlocutor and, above all, as a friend. Taking my clue from Nietzsche's claim that every great philosophy is a form of 'personal confession,' I would like to start by asking you to comment on the 'emotion of thought' that ties you to Lacoue-Labarthe, the man and the thinker.

AR: I had a very personal bond with Philippe, for all kinds of reasons and impulses. We can certainly start, as you suggest, with a personal confession. During one of our first meetings I remember sitting with him at table, for lunch with a group of professors in Irvine, California. He was entirely ignoring me until someone said something about my name and its Hebraity. It seemed as though the minute that Philippe heard I was Jewish, he suddenly cathected. I have to say that was the access-code for him. His philo-Semitism embarrassed me because I had never experienced it before (I experienced its opposite). I didn't know what to do with it, but I decided not to repel it, and opened myself to the sudden turn towards me, or my name, as a gift and as an offer. I thought, 'maybe that's the first doorkeeper, as in Kafka, the *Turhüter*, and I shouldn't let that door slam; maybe we can get past it because now at least I have his attention.' It was a start. And so, I didn't do anything to ever allow him to abandon his interest in me.

At the same time, I have to say that everything about Philippe and me was pathos-filled, deep, and quietly passionate. He made so much possible. He made it possible to read Heidegger – for a Jewish person.[2] The way Philippe took on Heidegger and had this ethical voice, timbre, and calming sureness moved my heart and made me feel a little more safe in the worlds that I was bounced out of. I go to places where I am not so welcome. I haven't necessarily always felt invited to the men's clubs of philosophical and literary inquiries. But something about Philippe's quiet outrage at certain persecutions and violences made me feel comfortable in his vicinity. I appreciate him – deeply.

NL: How do you recall the experience of working in his proximity when you were both teaching at Berkeley? Was there an intimidating side to his presence?

AR: I have a story that might help me address this question. One day, my editor said that we needed a blurb for my book on drugs and addiction.[3] We were short on time so, I thought: 'Philippe is teaching at Berkeley and I'm teaching at Berkeley, and I'm supposed to see him for dinner, so I'll pry a blurb out of him.' We had dinner, and I asked him. He answered, '*d'accord*'; but he immediately added: 'Tomorrow you'll read me the book. I want you to read it to me, before I come up with a blurb.' And I thought: 'We don't have time for this!' So we sat next to each other: he was like my piano teacher, or Latin teacher. But then something happened that I couldn't have anticipated. I was already bent over my text, humbled in prearranged humiliation. I was on the verge of tears having to read to him my book and translate it into my not greatly solidified French. But there was a moment when he just smiled at me and said: '*Tu as écrit ça? Non. . . c'est pas vrai*!' And I said: 'That's what it says here.' I was already waiting for a smack-down, or some kind of violent rejection, but he just smiled, and he gave every indication of being happy with my delivery. I still remember the word that toned down his severity, his acute *écoute*. He couldn't believe that I would dare to write something on narcosism!

There was indeed a protestant severity about Philippe. I may be wrong but I don't recall a sense of knee-slapping humour particularly. There was a kind of heaviness about his being and judgement that you couldn't wriggle your way out of, as sometimes I could with

Derrida – via a sudden outburst of parabasis, a spark of humour, or outrageous provocation. I have seen Philippe smile, and I've been able sometimes to put a smile on his face. But his expression always had the back-up crew of bewilderment and astonishment that might have been questioning. It was never a done deal with him; there was a severity that I even feared about him.

NL: Do you usually teach Lacoue-Labarthe? And what do you think distinguishes him from other French thinkers who are commonly grouped under the umbrella terms 'deconstruction' or 'poststructuralism'?

AR: When I love certain thinkers I want to teach them and quote them in order to make sure they stay close and are put in circulation. When Philippe left his body and left us I felt the real fragility of his legacy. I thought that all he represented was something that could vanish. So, I felt the responsibility to almost single-handedly assure its survival. I had the great fear of losing him as an oeuvre as well as losing him; or, maybe, that was the way I could deal with losing him. I had not one but two commemorations in New York.[4] I teach him as often as I can, and I feel like I have to almost artificially inseminate his work, in all sorts of places, some more plausible than others. Susan Sontag once said that friendship has destroyed letters, to the extent that friends just keep on promoting each other so that true judgement can't even be made. But in the case of Lacoue-Labarthe I don't waver in my evaluation of the importance of his work.

There is something very subtle in terms of the question that you asked about how to distinguish him from other so-called 'deconstructionists' or 'poststructuralists.' I would say that Philippe has what he calls 'rigorous hesitations' in the way he proceeds. There is something very surprisingly (in a Hölderlinian way) sober and sovereign, something very ethically pacifying about the way he goes step by step in the confrontations that he felt were essential to the unfolding of thought. There is a thoroughgoing modesty in the rhetoric of Lacoue-Labarthe that I appreciate. And not even a flirt with the motif of weakness, or deceleration of thought. What I mean by this is that he did not draw interest in his modesty or flip it into a usable concept. He did not turn weakness or metaphysical weariness into a brilliantly compelling paraconcept, as Levinas does. There was also something quietly warrior-like in the way he took on the big guns, or the big *topoi* of the day. Sometimes he would really stick to his guns in ways that seemed almost obstinate. He was as brave as he was fragile. I'm not surprised that he addressed himself to Hölderlin's *Dichtermut* (the poet's courage) because I think he must have had a great struggle with his own courageousness coming from such an abyss of needling fearfulness.

The other thing that may be mentioned is the way Lacoue-Labarthe lived his life philosophically – to a certain degree. That is to say, he encouraged a resurgence of a kind of *Lebensphilosophie*. When we talk about Philippe (and also, to a certain extent, Jean-Luc Nancy, but differently) there was always a community, a living-with, a *Mitsein* practice that reminded me of the German Romantics. There were great moments of restricted solitude, pressure zones that were nearly unbearable for him. To a great extent Philippe, for me, was a figure of extreme solitude, but he was also, at the same time, the most communal and communitarian of people.

NL: Lacoue-Labarthe's writing style, in 'The Horror of the West' and also elsewhere, is sometimes characterized by the spoken dimension of his voice. At times, he even seems to speak in an informal, casual way. In the past, this has cost him the charge of naivety. And yet, this 'naivety' is only apparent and his voice is informed by an uncompromising demand for theoretical rigor and clarity. Could you comment on the particularity of Lacoue-Labarthe's voice?

AR: As the great friend that I am capable of being, trained on Freudian ambivalence – meaning that I undermine the friend, I try to trap him and catch him off guard – I have an anecdote about that sort of tendency. There was something very solid and grounded about Philippe's presencing. So I don't want to make him out to be so fragile and modest because he was careful, but he was sure of his aim. Nonetheless, one of the offices of friendship in our experience together was for me to try to destabilize him, or dislocate him from that place of sovereignty he occupied. One day, I said to him: 'Oh, by the way, I'm going to teach Paul de Man today and did you know that he said that your reading of Nietzsche is like a first reading of a naïve person?'[5] I don't know what I thought I was doing. Perhaps delivering the message that in those days I tried to deliver: that I was the only friend that could be counted on? Or was it about an impish, troublemaking incursion that I was delighted maliciously in producing? Who knows what the hell I was doing? I couldn't help myself and I tried to provoke him in so many ways. Because he was

so calm, I wanted to see if I could bring him over to my side of the barricade of obsessional neurotic or, more to the point, hysterical behavior. He was quiet for a moment, and I thought, 'I got him!' And then, very calmly, he said: '*Oui, . . . c'est pas faux*.' And that made him even stronger, firmer and more sovereign. It didn't work; from that moment he was unbeatable.

Let's get serious here. I am so astonished that you would want to retrieve people's statements about some sort of naivety. His writings demonstrate astonishing control and depth, a far-ranging grasp of the political consequences of every possible metaphysical move. There are talking texts that I remember where he is addressing someone pointedly,[6] but I wonder if these statements refer more to a tonality than to the content of his massive reach. It's as with Nietzsche: when Nietzsche does the auto-critical feint you realize that people picked it up and run with it, but one should never do that without considering the irony of a self-put-down that is several registers removed from what is said. Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe was as naïve as Tiresias.

NL: I am grateful that you emphasize Lacoue-Labarthe's extreme formal and rhetorical sophistication. Even texts originally prepared for oral presentations are never as spontaneous and direct as they might initially appear.

AR: And they are refreshing for the way they pull back on themselves, and don't boom out as just another assertion of truth, as you get in some philosophers. If, at times, Philippe seems to be speaking about 'truth,' or 'essence' one should thus be careful to always read such statements in the context of his highly stylized philosophical prose, his citational virtuosity and impeccable knowledge of Plato, Heidegger and Derrida and the other prime movers or suspects. Nor is his voice libidinally over invested as you get in other philosophers who are very high on themselves, very sure of themselves, or plainly arrogant. Somehow Philippe was able to say things like, 'this is provisional,' these are just 'brief remarks,' and stay rigorous without seeming to be playing around with us, or jerking us around theoretically.

NL: Many readers who will read 'The Horror of the West' might encounter Lacoue-Labarthe's thought for the first time. Since his reading of *Heart of Darkness* is particularly compressed at the conceptual level, do you have a piece of advice for these readers?

AR: I would tell those readers that Philippe can be trusted. I understand that especially in our fast-food, fast-thought cultures that force acceleration (we are result-oriented, business-oriented, under the gun of gains, and subject to the push towards scientific objectivization) his writings will stand out as requiring a different temporality and degree of attention: one has to slow down for the checkpoints, the allusive clusters and dense indicators of his text. But readers who are generous and capacious and smart enough to offer themselves the gift of a first encounter with Philippe (however dense, difficult or problematic and short-circuited it might seem) should probably feel that they can entrust themselves to his insights on Conrad and many other fields as well. Perhaps 'The Horror of the West' will work as a gateway drug. I hope so, in the sense that they will start smoking and injecting-introjecting the other texts, and investigating where his reading of Conrad might have come from, what kind of a splinter it is, what kind of a split-off part it is of a truly worthy *oeuvre*. I myself remain an amateur as concerns this particular contribution of Lacoue-Labarthe and tend to feel more at home in his larger works.

NL: Here is perhaps one of those splinters. In *Préface à la disparition*,[7] a youthful biographical text published only recently, the echoes with 'The Horror of the West' are particularly strong. For instance, Lacoue-Labarthe qualifies Conrad's tale as an 'event of thought', and the very same phrase also occurs in *Préface* in relation to a dream he had.[8] In this text he also describes 'the horror of death' in a context that resonates powerfully with *Heart of Darkness*.[9] This is not the moment to enter into the details of this scene, but perhaps you could comment on the role of the affective, lived experience in Lacoue-Labarthe's understanding of the horror?

AR: Philippe had to clear many abysses to get to the notational space that we can now calmly observe, examine and explore together. He certainly carried massive scripts of destruction that also lapsed into self-destruction. He carried monstrous worlds of demonic takedowns that he was fighting often, and he was in a place of great struggle. Particularly in the later texts he is meditating on this all the time. So yes, certainly, these texts are resonating with his own experience, a confrontation with various terrifying experiences.

But here is one thing that Philippe has said to help orient our thoughts and that your readers might be interested in; he said that in

the twentieth century there were three major motifs for the thinkers that we cherish, continue to read and which continue to provoke our thought: one is the mission, the other the struggle, and the last is the task. The *mission* is something he associated with Heidegger; the *struggle* is a Marxist or Marxian motor; and the *task* he ascribed to Benjamin. Struggle, mission, task. Of course, if we were to dwell on these three kinds of tracks we would have to see not only how they operate but also how eventually they contaminate and leak into each other. He provisionally keeps them separate to show the invested relatedness to the work that has to be done. I think this comes from a very – if I may use this metaphor still today – deep place in him. I do think he struggled, and I do think he had a sense of task. He also has a very unique diction and rhetoric of ethicity in the way he approaches problems. Rather than seeing those cautionary remarks as naïve or self-deprecating, I would say that it's part of his ethics to stay clear of excess by limiting a statement to 'this is only this'. I think he had a great deal of lucidity about his own limits. I don't think he was fishing for compliments, and I don't think it was part of a narcissistic economy, but he held himself to a very high standard – with thousands of quotes – of 'authenticity.' He also felt that the mission that Heidegger enrolled for was calamitous. So I would think that Lacoue-Labarthe is politically urgent in the sense that he also takes measure of the catastrophe that a wrong turn in thought can induce.

NL: A catastrophe that culminates in what he calls, thinking of the Holocaust, 'the horror of the West.' What do you think is the relevance of Philippe's effort, in his larger works, to 'think and rethink mimesis,' in order to avoid future horrors?

AR: Lacoue-Labarthe opened the dossier of 'mimetology,' a large dossier involving sexual difference, metaphysical and hierarchical markings and blunders that we still are suffering from.[10] There is something that is still politically urgent about how he pushed up this thought in our faces. At the time, it was very hard perhaps to grasp mimesis as something that ought to be taken with utmost seriousness because it sounded so old-fashioned for the American receptor system. It's only coming through now, through some sort of delay call forwarding device to what extent we are still stuck on mimesis in very covert and unavowed ways. So the unavowable in mimesis, its desirability, its abjection and the kinds of constructions

and institutions that depend on it, continue to hold their *omertà function* around mimesis. And I think we still require a good listen from Lacoue-Labarthe.

NL: In your moving homage to Lacoue-Labarthe you write: 'Philippe had access to the catastrophic intuition that informs, structures and dominates the grammar of our mimetic hell.'[11] This affirmation refers to Philippe's thought in general but also captures, with extreme precision, what is at stake in 'The Horror of the West.' In order to conclude would you be willing to unpack this dense passage for us?

AR: Lacoue-Labarthe certainly was able to critically approach certain things, to show how (let me talk Heideggerian here), how this is a *destiny* for us. What he does with mimesis is of destinal importance. It's not just a whim or caprice on the part of M. Lacoue-Labarthe to have gone there. Nor is it something that can be contained, restricted and controlled within the precincts of the philosophical, the political or the literary. It's not accidental or minoritizable. It's not a minoritized trace. He uncovered other birth texts in mimetic theory by critical thinkers as diverse as Luce Irigaray, René Girard and Jacques Derrida, for instance.[12] But what he did with them, how he has run with them, and how he insisted on mimesis as an historical-political off-shore hurricane, is what interests me. Do we continue to shutter our homes? Is this hurricane going to stay off-shore? Or are we going to be hit by the destructive velocities of mimetic slams? And by this figure I mean that there is something menacing today still. Maybe mimesis could dissipate in other formulations, figurations or disfigurations. But it could also hit us in the house of being, in a very core place where the issues are key survival issues. So, everything that Philippe touched, I felt, was heavy and destinal – even though all of these words would have to be further shaken up, as Derrida would say (*sollicités*).

NL: Thank you for sharing your *émotion de la pensée*. What you said will surely help future readers approach Lacoue-Labarthe's insights into what he calls 'the horror of the West' with the right frame of mind.

AR: Thank you for honouring Philippe; I think it's very important.

Notes

1 What follows is an abridged version of a conversation between Avital Ronell and Nidesh Lawtoo (in the company of Christopher Fynsk) held at the European Graduate School in Saas Fee, Switzerland, on 15 August 2011. All endnotes are the editor's.

2 On Avital Ronell's take on Lacoue-Labarthe's reading of Heidegger, *techne*, the Holocaust and the problematic of 'national aestheticism' (themes that are central to 'The Horror of the West'), see *The Telephone Book: Technology, Schizophrenia, Electric Speech* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1989), 412–3, n. 7, n. 9.

3 Avital Ronell, *Crack Wars: Literature, Addiction, Mania* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1992).

4 Traces of one of these commemorations, titled 'Catastrophe and Caesura: Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe Today' (NYU, 2007), can be found at the following website: http://www.lacoue-labarthe.org, accessed 20 October 2011.

5 Paul de Man, *Allegories of Reading: Figural Language in Rousseau, Nietzsche, Rilke, and Proust* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1979), 83.

6 See for instance, the opening addresses to Derrida and Lyotard in Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe, *L'imitation des modernes* (Paris: Galilée, 1986), 229, 257.

7 Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe, *Préface à la disparition* (Christian Bourgois Éditeur, 2009).

8 Lacoue-Labarthe, *Préface*, 17.

9 Lacoue-Labarthe, *Préface*, 33; see also 26–40.

10 See Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe, *Typography: Mimesis, Philosophy, Politics*, ed. Christopher Fynsk (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989); Lacoue-Labarthe, *L'imitation*.

11 Avital Ronell, 'L'indélicatesse d'un interminable fondu au noir', trans. Daniel Loayza, *Europe* 973 (2010): 24. Trans. modified.

12 Luce Irigaray, *This Sex Which is Not One*, trans. Catherine Porter (New York: Cornell University Press, 1985); René Girard, *Violence and the Sacred*, trans. Patrick Gregory (Baltimore, MD: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1977); Jacques Derrida, 'The Double Session,' in *Dissemination*, trans. Barbara Johnson (Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 1981), 173–285.

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